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E.O. 12958: DECL: AFTER KOREAN REUNIFICATION
TAGS: [ECON](#) [KN](#) [KS](#) [PGOV](#)
SUBJECT: ROKG TO PROVIDE FLOOD-RELATED AID TO NORTH KOREA

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The ROKG is expected to announce emergency aid to the DPRK, probably through private NGOs, in the next few days, in the wake of reports of hundreds of deaths and extensive agricultural and infrastructure damage from the mid-July floods in the North. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade official told poloff that the emergency aid would not constitute lifting the ban on regular rice and fertilizer aid imposed after the July 5 DPRK missile launches. Minister of Unification Lee Jong-saek was said to be meeting with NGOs on August 9-10 to discuss the ROKG's role in providing aid. Several private South Korean NGOs have already begun to respond by shipping food and other aid to North Korea. An August 8 report from a semi-official DPRK source says that North Korea sustained 549 dead, 295 missing and 3,043 injured. One South Korean NGO, Good Friends, estimates that as many as 10,000 people have died and over one million people are displaced as a result of the floods, but other observers see that report as an exaggeration. END SUMMARY.

DEATH AND DAMAGE REPORTS

2. (U) Heavy rains hit North (as well as South) Korea repeatedly during the latter half of July. In the North, the heaviest rains were in the central and southern areas: South Pyeongan, Hwanghae and Gangwon provinces. Reporting from the DPRK's media, though incomplete and unverifiable, conveys a sense of serious damage. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported "flood damages in some parts of the country" on July 16. Korean Central TV (KCTV) reported on July 16 that the Daedong river, which runs through Pyongyang, had flooded for the first time since 1990. KCTV reported on July 21 that the Pyongyang Railroad Office was participating in flood recovery efforts, including transporting workers to repair destroyed railroad infrastructure. KCTV reported on July 21 on damage to agricultural land in the South Hwanghae province and that "hundreds of people were reported dead or missing in the South Pyeongan province area." Pyongyang Broadcasting reported much damage in Pyongyang, 11 villages completely flooded, county roads destroyed, and transportation and communication cut off on July 24.

3. (U) The Choson Sinbo, a pro-North Korean newspaper, reported on August 8 that July's heavy rainfall caused "serious damage," with 549 persons dead, 295 missing, and 3,043 injured. The report also said that 4,438 houses

(housing 7,847 families) were completely destroyed, 3,051 houses (housing 5,282 families) were partially destroyed, and 9,178 houses (housing 15,618 families) were inundated, and that 23,974 hectares ("jeongbo") of farmland were seriously damaged. The conservative South Korean newspaper Dong-A Ilbo, reporting on these figures, said that it was unprecedented for North Korean-oriented media to report specific data on flood damage in this manner. A World Food Program representative told us on August 8 that she considered the Choson Sinbo to be the most authoritative report on the floods to date.

ROKG CONSIDERING "EMERGENCY" RESPONSE

¶4. (C) The ROKG is assessing the extent of the damage in North Korea this week, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade Director for Inter-Korean Policy Kim Ki-woong told us on August 8, and is considering providing food aid to North Korea. If so, he hastened to add, this would be an "emergency" response and would not constitute resumption of the food aid program that was put on hold after the July 5 DPRK missile launches. He said the ROKG was trying to get a more complete picture of the extent of the damage and needs in North Korea. J.R. Kim (Kim Jong-nu), Director of the Ministry of Unification's International Cooperation Team, said that Minister Lee Jong-seok is meeting with various South Korean NGOs this week to assess needs and determine ROKG participation. Press reports indicate that the ROKG is already matching, or more than matching, private aid donations destined for North Korea.

¶5. (C) Director of the Red Cross Inter-Korean Cooperation Team Choi Young-woon told us at an August 9 meeting that the ROKG may decide later this week to provide rice assistance to North Korea, but if it does so, the rice will be provided through the Red Cross as humanitarian aid. This would be different from the usual economic and social channel of providing rice through the Ministry of Unification. He said that the ROKG was working to maintain the ban on normal economic assistance to the DPRK that was cut off after July 5, but at the same time wanted to find a way to respond to the humanitarian situation. Asked what the Red Cross thought the flood victims would need, besides rice, Choi said "everything," and recounted that in his earlier experience with providing aid to North Koreans, they even used the fertilizer bags, once emptied, as window covering to block the wind.

¶6. (C) Both the South Korean press and the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) appear receptive to ROKG aid in this instance. GNP advisor Walter Peak told us that GNP does not yet have an official position on the ROKG providing aid, but that his sense was that GNP members supported aid to "civilian" flood victims at this time. In the media, GNP has called for a joint GNP-Uri fact-finding delegation to go to North Korea and assess the situation -- a near impossibility based on the DPRK's reclusiveness.

DPRK AT FIRST REFUSED AID, NOW APPEARS RECEPTIVE

¶7. (SBU) The DPRK, through its infrequent official statements, initially refused to accept South Korean Red Cross aid, in keeping with the negative tone established after the July 5 DPRK missile launches, but it has allowed several private South Korean NGOs, including the Join Together Society, to deliver shiploads of aid. An August 9 press report says that the North Korean side of the Inter-Korean Cooperation Committee faxed a request for assistance with a specific list of relief equipment to the South Korean side of the committee. On the other hand, the DPRK appears wary of any additional aid from the World Food Program. Seoul WFP rep Helen Lee told poloff on August 8 that the DPRK had turned down WFP's offer an extra supply of rice for flood-afflicted areas.

GOOD FRIENDS NGO ESTIMATES 10,000 DEATHS -- OUTLIER

¶18. (U) Most South Korean sources report deaths and damage in the range of the Choson Sinbo figures (para. 3), estimating hundreds dead, up to 21,000 houses destroyed (Red Cross) and significant damage to roads, railroads and farmland. The outlier is a report from Good Friends, an NGO that works on human and economic rights for North Koreans and has been critical of the North Korean government and which claims to have an extensive network of other NGO representatives and businesspeople who regularly travel to North Korea.

¶19. (U) The Good Friends "North Korea Today" report for August claims that 10,000 North Koreans have died as a result of the floods and the 1.3 to 1.5 million are displaced. Going through the report, however, one does not get a sense that the numbers are firm. The report includes a map citing rainfall and damage for two dozen counties in the central (slightly northeast of Pyongyang) and southeast areas of the DPRK. The report gives a death estimate of 1,000 for Yangduk county in the central region and cites 200 deaths in Haeju, near the DMZ in the west; there are no other regional death estimates. It says that the "current situation is comparable to the flood of 1995 that led millions to starvation," and calls on the international community, "even the conservatives of the US and the Korean society who have been critical of the DPRK regime" to respond. The report appears to be more a of projection of how bad things could be, if the floods are followed by a wave of malaria and other diseases, and a heartfelt appeal for assistance, than a purely fact-based report.

¶10. (SBU) In an August 7 meeting with Poloff, Good Friends representative Erica Kang did not provide much additional detail on where the numbers in the report came from, but said that the numbers were mostly based on conversations between various NGO representative and some ethnic Chinese Korean businessmen with DPRK local officials. She said that Good Friends had received an early report of 3,400 dead at the end of July when a South Korean NGO rep delivering coal to an area near Kaesong had talked to a local official. Since then, additional reports had come in making the situation look much worse. She would not provide any detail on the report's sources.

¶11. (SBU) A knowledgeable NGO source warned poloff on August 3 to be wary of Good Friends' statistics. She pointed out that Good Friends often relied on information from anonymous sources within North Korea which was passed on through several intermediaries. Further, the information was sometimes subject to "amateurish calculations." For example, in estimating that 4 to 5 million died from famine in the DPRK during the mid-1990s, Good Friends based its calculation on a relatively small statistical sample from an especially hard-hit province and then extrapolated the findings to the whole country. As a result, it was likely that Good Friends greatly overestimated the number of famine-related casualties.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DPRK COULD BE SERIOUS -----

¶12. (SBU) Moon Chun-sang, a North Korea specialist with the Asia Foundation, told us on August 3 that while the flood damage might not be as extreme as reported by Good Friends, the situation could become critical, and even destabilizing, the next time a typhoon or major storm hits the region. If the current floods have destroyed whatever flood control infrastructure existed, the next major storm could be a true disaster. According to Moon, when natural disasters hit North Korea in the 1990s, most survivors could conceive of no option other than to rebuild their homes and carry on with their lives. With increasing numbers of defectors, and the developing ability of defectors to communicate with remaining family members through brokers or other networks, the situation has changed greatly. Natural disaster survivors may for the first time see defection as a viable option. This new awareness, he said, could lead to a destabilizing surge of defector and refugee activity following the next natural disaster. Another experienced observer of North

Korea, journalist and professor Andrei Lankov, said that the floods' most serious result may be to threaten the DPRK's intention to become more self-sufficient in producing its own food supply, and hence less dependent on outside aid that could be turned off.

COMMENT: ROKG TRYING TO STRIKE A BALANCE

¶13. (C) The ROKG is already matching the donations to private NGOs that are providing assistance to North Korea, so in that sense official aid is already flowing north. However, during this week of heavy press coverage of likely direct ROKG aid, the ROKG appears to be going to great lengths not to signal that it has loosened the ban on economic assistance to the DPRK imposed after the missile launches. END COMMENT.

VERSHBOW